

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

714/744 P STREET

P.O. BOX 942732

SACRAMENTO, CA 94234-7320

(916) 657-1425



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The Honorable John Burton, Chairman
Senate Rules Committee
State Capitol, Room 500
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Senator Burton:

I appreciate the opportunity to share with you and the other Members of the Senate Rules Committee my goals for the California Department of Health Services. As you know, the Department is large and complex, and it is extremely demanding in the diversity of issues it must address. As an example, on a daily basis the Department ensures the safety of California's food and water, prepares to respond to natural disasters and the threat of bioterrorism, delivers preventive health programs and services, protects the public from communicable diseases, and provides health care coverage for five million Californians.

The primary role of the Department is, simply stated, to improve the health of all Californians. Population-based public health and preventive services, environmental health programs, medical care services, and those programs that focus on special medical needs contribute greatly to the education of our children, the productivity of our workforce, and the quality of life for our senior population. These programs and services must be responsive to the changing needs of our communities and must be designed and delivered with the understanding that a one size fits all state program will not meet the health care and public health needs of California's ethnically, culturally, and geographically diverse communities.

As a nurse, strong communication skills are central to my training and experience. Nurses work with diverse populations and are usually the first and last people to speak with patients, often communicating with them during times of stress. As a result of this training and experience, I am committed to opening the lines of communication with the diversity of stakeholders in the Department's activities in an effort to improve the Department's programs and services. Building trust and developing partnerships with the Legislature, local health departments and communities, health care and community-based providers, professional and advocacy organizations, and the recipients of the Department's programs and services will be crucial.

To this end, I have participated in recent legislative budget hearings and also have been responsive to requests for information and assistance from individual legislators. I meet monthly with the leadership of the California Conference of Local Health

The Honorable John Burton

Officers who represent all 61 of California's local health jurisdictions, and I also have met with numerous constituent groups over the last several months.

In addition to improving communication between the Department and its stakeholders, the Department needs to assess its programs and services and begin from within to identify ways in which it can be a stronger Department. The Department is fortunate to have talented and dedicated individuals on its staff, many of whom are nationally- recognized experts in their fields. Their talents and expertise must be nurtured and supported. Additionally, the Department must draw upon the best talents that California and this country has to offer to further improve its programs and services.

There are many pressing health and public health issues that effect the welfare of Californians which need significant attention in the coming years. Fraud in the Medi-Cal program must be eliminated. However, the Medi-Cal program also must be accessible to those who are eligible and must ensure that quality care is available to beneficiaries. The threat of bioterrorism requires coordinated statewide planning and response. Existing and emerging communicable diseases must be controlled and infrastructures must be in place to support these activities. Environmental threats must be managed in partnership with affected communities. These and other significant department efforts will require constant attention and vigilance so that we maintain the integrity of department programs and maintain the trust of the public that taxpayer dollars are well spent to protect and improve California's health.

The Department's role as a regulator exists to ensure that health care professionals and health care delivery facilities are providing the best care available to the people of California. This role is critical because the Department can never hope to meet its goal of improving the health of all Californians without all segments of the health and public health community delivering quality care and services. Through regulation, the Department can help assure that health care partners throughout the State are meeting standards that promote safe and quality care.

While the Department has considerable experience and expertise, health and public health care delivery are as much an art as they are a science. The role of science, while crucial, does not always provide all of the answers and solutions. And, there is not always agreement on the truth of the science. Communities must come together to discuss and debate health and public health policy issues and efforts must be made to involve stakeholders as much as possible in the decisions that impact their health and their communities. It is not likely that all stakeholders will agree on the best course of action and, at times, the science will not provide clear direction. At these times, the Department must work even more diligently to keep the lines of communication open and to work toward mutually agreeable solutions to the challenges it faces.

In summary, over the next several years, the Department will: 1) ensure that programs and services are responsive to the diverse needs of California; 2) improve communication with stakeholders; 3) assess programs and services and take steps to strengthen efforts where possible; 4) vigilantly attend to the myriad of health and public health issues impacting California; 5) administer the regulator role toward an end of improving the quality of care delivered in California; and 6) focus on the art as well as the science of health and public health. The people of California deserve the highest quality health and public health programs. In my tenure as Director, I will ensure that the California Department of Health Services continually strives to meet that expectation so that we can improve the health of all Californians.

Sincerely,

Diana M. Bontá, R.N., Dr.P.H.
Director